



Bob Nixon: AMC's Master of Design

By Patrick Foster

Photographs courtesy of the Pat Foster Collection

Over the years, there have been any number of talented designers working at independent auto companies like Packard, Studebaker or Willys. But perhaps because of American Motors's longevity in the market, it seems as though AMC designers have a particularly prominent place in the annals of car design. And among AMC designers, Robert Nixon holds a place of special honor. He was the big man who designed a small car—and came up with some of the most unique products the automotive industry has ever seen.

Bob Nixon had always wanted to be a car designer. As a youth, he went to work for Chrysler as a technical illustrator. While there, he attended the Chrysler

Institute of Engineering, got his degree and was eventually given a job in the Dodge styling studio.

When Bob joined AMC in 1959, it was a time of growth and opportunity. He recalled, "The AMC styling department was expanding at the time; Dick Teague had joined the company, and it looked like a good opportunity. As things turned out, I had a very interesting and exciting career there—precarious at times, but always exciting."

Bob started out working on small car projects. "I think the Rambler American was the first design work I did for Teague," he said. "Teague gave me the assignment of coming up with a front-

end concept for the American, which I did. He liked what he saw and we went into clay with it." Right away, the 1964 Rambler American proved to be especially popular with consumers, one of the best-selling AMC cars ever.

We've always felt the 1964 American front end resembled the 1963 Chrysler Turbine concept car, so we asked Bob if he recalls being influenced by it. "I'm sure I was to some degree," he said. "I'm sure I saw photographs of it. Designers always get some degree of influence from other cars, and that goes on today."

Also in 1964, AMC unveiled the Tarpon, a concept car similar in size and appearance to the 1965 Plymouth



This sketch by Bob Nixon, dated November 4, 1963, has distinctly Chrysler-like lines.



Some hints of the Javelin and AMX grille lines to come can be seen in this 1965 sketch.



Above, a sketch from 1963 has interesting bisected headlamps. At left, the AMC Styling Studio is at work, circa 1960. Working on a sketch in the foreground, on the far right, is Bob Nixon. In front of him is large-car designer Vince Geraci; standing by the clay scale model, hand to his chin, is AMC design chief Dick Teague.

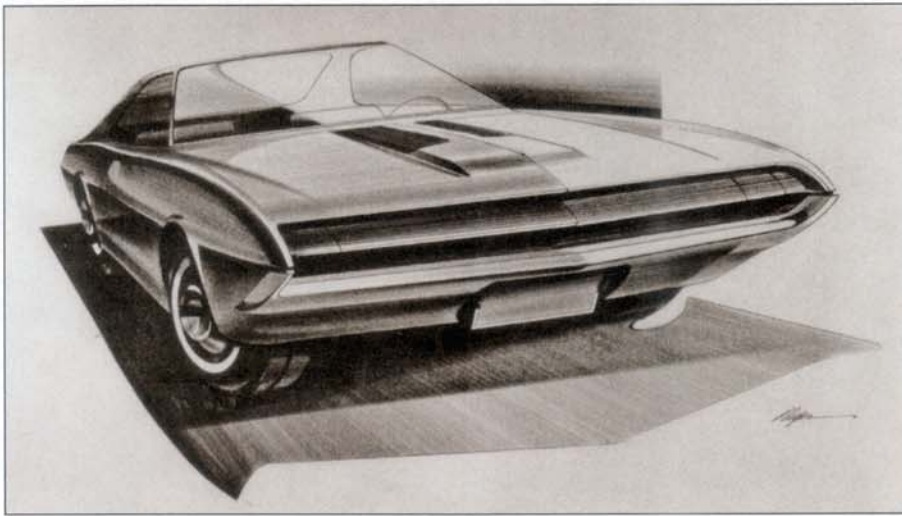
Barracuda; it was released months before Ford released the Mustang. Built on the 106-inch-wheelbase Rambler American chassis to Bob's design, many people think the Tarpon could have beat Ford to market as the first "pony car."

But AMC president Roy Abernethy ordered the Tarpon to be recast on the larger Rambler Classic chassis. The resulting design went into production in 1965 as the Marlin, a mid-size fastback that never caught on with the public. Most people believe that if AMC had stayed with Bob's original concept, it would have been a huge hit.

Looking back, Bob mused, "If they had gone with the original Tarpon concept, I think the car would have been a lot more successful. But Roy Abernethy was chairman at the time and he felt



Bob Nixon's first big project was the Tarpon, a sporty 1964 concept based on the Rambler American. In its original configuration, it was a huge hit at auto shows, but AMC management had it reworked as a mid-size car—the Marlin—which didn't attract buyers.



"Rogue" was the codename for this full-size clay model of what would become the Javelin.

strongly that the car should offer a V-8 engine. So it became a lot larger than it should have been, and the proportions were not as good. Everybody in the studio was convinced it was a big mistake, but the decision had been made. Such is life."

With the new American a runaway success, AMC wanted to keep the momentum going, so a facelift was slated for 1966. Naturally, Bob and his staff were given the job. In the redesign, the front end was made longer, with a squarer look than before. "I worked on that one, too," recalled Bob. "I don't think it was as good as the original concept, but it was one of those things that Product Planning would ask for from time to time, just to make the car look a little different. Sometimes facelifts don't work out, and I think that was the case there. I would have preferred staying with the softer headlamp configuration and basic grille concept."

For a time during the Sixties, there were two major studios in AMC Styling: small cars and big cars. Bob ran the small car studio while his friend Vince Geraci was responsible for big cars. However, in a significant change introduced in the late Sixties, Vince was put in charge of interior design, while Bob became responsible for exteriors. "Things were constantly in a state of change. We bopped around on everything. We did everything: small,

Peaked front fenders and hidden headlamps characterize this sporty coupe.

large, whatever was thrown at us."

Soon, work began on the design of the car that would replace the Rambler, the 1970 Hornet. Bob and his crew, working on the exterior, began the laborious process of fleshing out the new design. Regarding his team, Bob said, "We had some very talented people: Felix De Rose, Keith Goodnough, Gerry Pietila, Chuck Hosper. These were some damn good people, very creative."

One of the team's most significant detailing triumphs on the Hornet was the Sportabout station wagon, which brought fastback styling to what had formerly been only a utilitarian family vehicle. Development of the popular Hornet range in turn led to the creation of one of the most memorable cars of the 1970s, AMC's saucy little Gremlin.

"Yes, the Gremlin was my baby. It happened very quickly, as I remember.



Signature square lines stand out on a full-size proposal for the 1964 Rambler American.

Dick Teague did the original sketches for the Gremlin and showed them to (Product VP) Gerry Meyers, who signed off on it because it was a new product we could do for very little money.

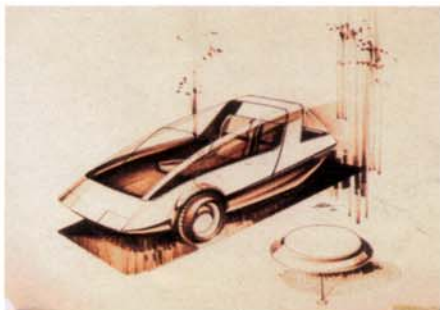
"I was so busy at the time that Vince Geraci's interior studio was asked to do a 'half bodyside' version of it. By the time that was pretty much completed, I had the manpower available to do a full-size clay. A designer by the name of Dick Jones was instrumental in following that concept through to completion. He was a tremendously good designer, a great guy and he deserves a lot of credit, which, unfortunately, he never got."

Bob still enjoys the Gremlin's success today. "Gremlin was a pretty basic car, but we sure sold a lot of them. It's still sort of a cult car today. We would try to freshen the thing every year, without changing sheetmetal. I remember designing dozens of rally stripe concepts over the years, to the point where you just got sick of doing them."

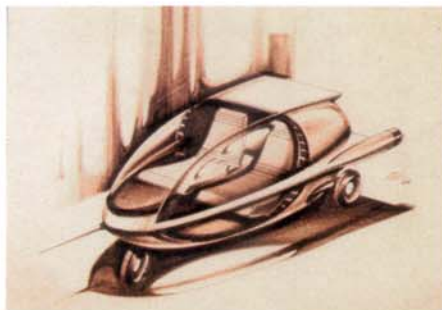
After the Hornet line and the Gremlin, the next large assignment for Bob and his team was the sporty new Matador coupe for 1974, a car that today is rapidly



Bob Nixon, in glasses, directs work on an AMX concept clay model in 1969.



Hints of Gremlin styling can be seen in the roof pillar of this 1966 commuter concept.



This cute commuter scooter, sketched some-time in 1966, was designed just for fun.



Handsome lines abound in this drawing, suggesting the Javelin's eventual shape.

growing in popularity among collectors. Matador was one AMC car that focused on pure styling and it got off to a great start: *Car and Driver* called it the best-looking car of 1974, but the following year, the fuel crisis cooled sales.

Bob's most controversial design was undoubtedly the Pacer. Of that project, he said, "Pacer started off as an abstract concept: It was new and unique. It wasn't like anybody else's. I think if it had stayed with its original package, it would have been a helluva lot more successful.

"Unfortunately, we had to widen that car considerably. It lost its light, fleet appearance and became an overweight-looking little car, like a pumpkin on wheels. The original design had better proportions; the width was almost the same as the overall length. When we started working on the full-size clay model, it had much leaner body sides.

"But Product Planning became convinced the car had to be made wider to accommodate future crash standards, with each side ending up several inches wider than the original design. We were forced to go with Product Planning's requirements and it ruined the aesthetics."

As a result of the widening, the Pacer also became very heavy. The extra weight hurt the car's fuel economy and performance. Even so, Pacer sold extremely well for a year or so before sales began to drop.

Of the 1978 Concord and 1979 Spirit, Bob could recall little, saying "Those happened very quickly. We needed something new and came up with something we could do relatively inexpensively. Regarding the Spirit Liftback's clean lines, Bob said, "It's what the Marlin should have looked like—we went back and tried it again."

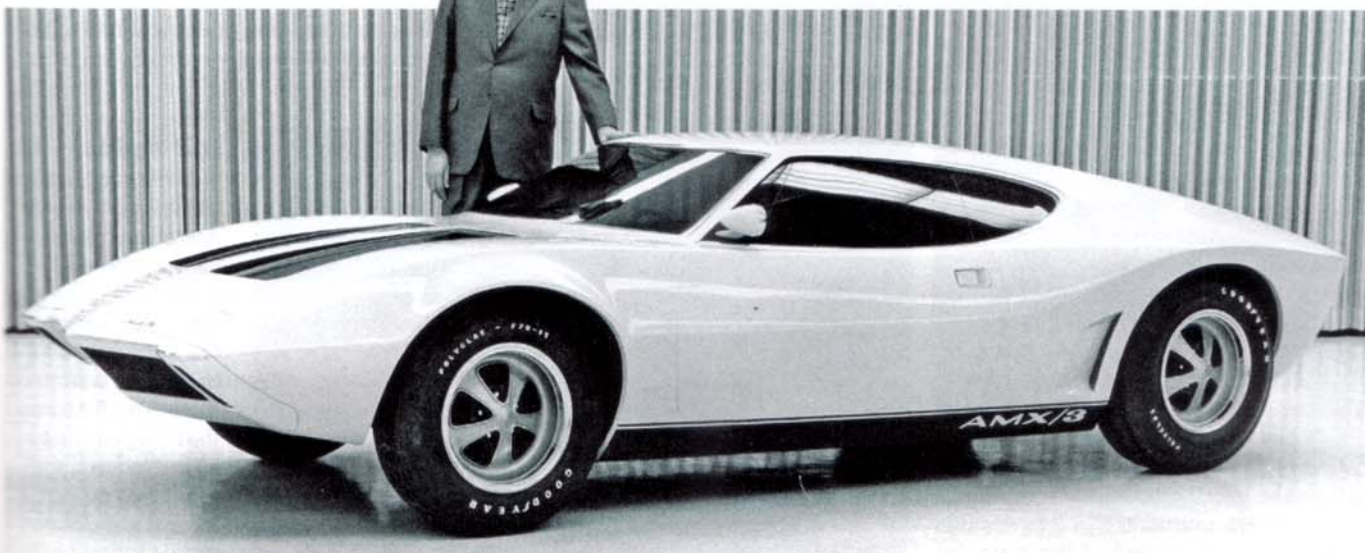
After Renault gained control of American Motors, the AMC design staff's focus was primarily on Jeep vehicles. Bob was in charge of AMC's most important program of the 1980s: designing the new downsized Jeep Cherokee and Wagoneer for 1984. The new XJs were crucial to AMC's survival because the Cherokee was its biggest profit-maker, and sales had collapsed after a sharp rise in the price of gasoline. Coincidentally, this was also going to be the first set of all-new Jeep vehicles designed by AMC.

The stakes were enormous, and what the AMC team ac-

complished was nothing short of miraculous: The XJ series models were the first sport utility vehicles to feature Uniframe (unibody) construction, the first four-door compact SUVs, and the only five-passenger compact SUVs on the market. Powered by a choice of four- or six-cylinder engines, they revolutionized the SUV market. In the process, they became the best-selling Jeep vehicles of all time. They are still in production today in certain parts of the world.

Not long after completing design work on the XJ, Bob put his team to work on another new product, code-named the ZJ. By the time it debuted as the 1993 Grand Cherokee, Chrysler had swallowed up AMC. But make no mistake about it: The original Grand Cherokee was an AMC design, with Bob Nixon's unmistakable fingerprints on it.

Bob's recognized design talent ensured him an important position in Chrysler Design, where he worked until retiring in 1992. Today, he can look back with pride at an incredible career filled with beautiful cars and trucks designed under his direction, vehicles that were bought and enjoyed by millions. ☞



Bob Nixon shows off the AMX/3 concept car, which he helped design as part of AMC's ongoing marketing efforts.